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MV

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: STRATEGY FOR ENGAGING ONE OF ISLAMIC
WORLD'S MOST PRO-U.S. COUNTRIES

REF: A. COLOMBO 135

- [1](#)B. 2006 COLOMBO 1910
- [1](#)C. 2006 COLOMBO 1862
- [1](#)D. 2006 COLOMBO 1827
- [1](#)E. 2006 COLOMBO 1443
- [1](#)F. 2005 COLOMBO 2144
- [1](#)G. 2005 COLOMBO 1881

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Maldives is a moderate, pro-American Islamic country that cooperates on American military objectives and is responsive to US advice on reform and openness. In a generation, it has gone from being South Asia's poorest country to that with the region's highest per-capita income. However, Maldives is at a crossroads as halting progress on allowing greater pluralism, a young population with a rising drug problem, growing Islamic extremism, and economic strains on its poorer citizens, pose significant challenges to President Gayoom and his country's pro-Western outlook. Despite these obstacles, progress remains possible. The US can play a significant role in supporting Maldives' efforts to achieve democratic and economic reform.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Post has drafted a Mission-wide strategy to assist Maldives as it evolves toward democracy, bearing in mind that USG financial resources will likely be severely constrained. The Embassy seeks Washington's support to bolster these efforts, bring about sustainable democratic reform, and help the country to confront its other challenges. The Ambassador and other senior US officials should urge the Maldivian president, reformists in the government, and opposition leaders to work together to move the reform process forward. USTR, State and other agencies such as USTDA, in tandem with the Embassy Economic Section, should promote Maldivian openness to US investments, engage regionally-based science, environment, and agriculture officers, and determine whether

Maldives would welcome a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. DAO and ODC, with cooperation from military officials, should seek to further boost military cooperation through exchanges, joint exercises, and ship visits. In addition, Washington can leverage Public Diplomacy's modest Fulbright program and also work with the New Delhi-based English Language Officer to assist the Maldives Ministry of Education as it plans to open the country's first-ever university in 2008, promote educational opportunities in the US, and use the International Visitor Fellows Program to meet democratization objectives and combat the rise in Islamic extremism. Per ref D, Management Section is preparing cost estimates for a proposed American Presence Post (APP). End summary.

SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES:
THREATS TO DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS?

Political Progress Slow

¶3. (SBU) Despite its strong Western orientation, this small Islamic nation has faced a number of challenges since it began an indigenous push for democratization starting in June ¶2004. Political parties, legally recognized for the first time in June 2005, have little maturity or understanding of their roles. The public, though engaged, remains broadly unaware of civic rights and responsibilities, in large part because social studies is not taught in schools. Both the government and the fledgling opposition Maldivian Democratic

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Party (MDP) have over-promised and under-delivered on reform commitments, leaving many citizens feeling frustrated and disenfranchised.

¶4. (SBU) Despite some potential for cross-party cooperation, progress on reform has been slow. In March 2006, the government published a "Roadmap for Reform" and subsequently introduced several bills to parliament that remained mired in committees. The government blamed opposition agitators for delaying the process, while the MDP complained that many of the bills codified existing poor practices and accused government-appointed parliamentarians of impeding genuine change.

Arrests, Violence, Mar Political Demonstrations

¶5. (SBU) Since political rallies were first legally permitted in 2005, tensions frequently have flared up during such demonstrations. The government often mischaracterizes reform activists as terrorists or seditious instigators attempting to incite violence; the opposition, for its part, deliberately provokes security forces and then accuses the police of using heavy-handed tactics to break up lawful gatherings.

Economic Pressures

¶6. (SBU) Maldives' small but rapidly growing economy offers significant untapped potential for US exports and investment in the tourism, aviation, energy, and other sectors. Nevertheless, economic concerns have created some strain in Maldives. According to a 2006 census, unemployment in Maldives is at 14.4 percent, while the country imports 53,000 foreign workers, primarily to carry out construction projects and staff resorts. Half the country is under the age of fifteen (see para 7). The lack of higher education capacity has given extremists from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan an opening to train young Maldivians who have then returned to lead a growing extremist strain that is critical of the more moderate, pro-Western Islam practiced by the President and

his Cabinet. Many locals, reluctant to break up family units by moving to resort islands to work, depend heavily on the fishing industry for income. Many have left their home islands to seek economic opportunities in Male', an island two square kilometers in size and home to 103,000 people. Male' is teeming with young people, some unemployed and many with substance abuse problems. It has become a flash-point for protests and occasional violence.

Rising Drug Problem

17. (SBU) Social pressures have exacerbated the political tensions; 50 percent of the population is under the age of 15, and there are no universities and few career options within Maldives. Disaffected young people have increasingly turned to drug use; in January 2007 the UNICEF Resident Representative in Male' estimated up to 25,000 people, or 7 percent of the population, regularly use hard drugs, normally heroin in the form of smoked "brown sugar." The average age of first use is 11 years old. In the small, tightly-knit island community, nearly every family has been affected by drug use in some way. UNICEF also cited anecdotal evidence that intravenous drug use may be on the rise, possibly in prison populations as well as within the general public. The high risk of needle-sharing, especially among users in jail, is potentially a major public health threat, UNICEF assessed.

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Potential Islamic Extremism

18. (SBU) Another emerging concern is the rise of Islamic extremism. From June of 2006 onward, interlocutors from across the political spectrum have worried that a fundamentalist strain of Islam antithetical to Maldives' traditional culture may be taking root. The Islamist Adalath (Justice) Party, which promotes "Koran over Constitution" ideals, has made small inroads, using its role as a political party to circumvent strict laws that limit public proselytizing. While the Adalath Party came in a distant third in a December 2005 parliamentary by-election, in January 2007 several Embassy contacts reported the Adalath Party was gaining in popularity. Adalath officials remained unresponsive to several Embassy requests to meet with them.

19. (SBU) In January 2007, the Information Minister worried that a small group of zealots felt even the Adalath Party was religiously lax, and the Attorney General was concerned the Supreme Islamic Council led by the Chief Justice was not providing an adequate counter-balance to fundamentalist influences. A female opposition MP expressed worry that on at least one island, the community was pressuring women to wear a full veil, formerly almost never seen in the moderate atoll nation (ref A). A number of contacts also noted that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan offered scholarships to madrassahs, and when Maldivians returned from such education programs, they were far more extremist in their practices and beliefs. Several times throughout 2006 and early this year, senior Maldivian officials requested that the US publicize educational opportunities in America and offer more cultural exchanges in order to provide a moderating voice highlighting democratic values.

ADVOCATING U.S. INTERESTS ON A CONSTRAINED BUDGET

10. (SBU) Recognizing that USG resources are limited, there are nonetheless numerous ways that the United States can help Maldives bring about sustainable democratic reform, and confront its other challenges so that the country maintains its pro-American outlook and orientation. We recommend the USG focus its efforts in the areas of promoting democratic

reform, enhancing the professionalism and pro-Western orientation of the security forces, promoting US exports, and leveraging our public diplomacy toolkit to help promote the role of women and educational opportunities in the US to counteract the efforts of Islamic extremists.

Engagement on Political Reform

¶11. (SBU) President Gayoom, in power since 1978, announced the reform agenda in 2004. He maintains a strong influence on the judiciary and legislature, so will remain the most important catalyst in the reform process. The Ambassador and other senior USG officials, through periodic visits and letters, should urge the president to push forward on democratization, maintain the timeline he set out in the March 2006 "Reform Roadmap," and thereby secure his legacy as a genuine and effective reformist. In addition, the USG should try to bolster the reformists' role in the cabinet through messages to the government that specifically laud those ministers' efforts. In addition to visits, messages from Washington, including letters to President Gayoom from principals, could have a strong positive impact. Both Post and the GORM would also warmly welcome high level visits to

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the Maldives, such as U/S Fore's planned March 7 trip to Male'.

¶12. (SBU) The USG should also continue to engage with actors across the political spectrum, encourage cooperative dialogue, and reiterate to the opposition that it must behave responsibly and within the greater national interest during the Maldives' transition to a stronger democracy. The Department's release of the 2006 Human Rights Reports will form the basis for constructive discussions with both GORM officials and opposition leaders. The Embassy will continue cultivating contacts in the burgeoning civil society sector and with journalists working on press freedom issues. The USG can spread the message in Maldives that democracy encompasses a broad range of vibrant institutions. In addition, the Embassy will undertake further outreach to the Islamist Adalath Party, attempting to engage the group to hear its concerns and criticisms.

Cooperation with U.S. Military

¶13. (SBU) Maldives has demonstrated several times its commitment to a close military-to military relationship with the United States. In 2006, Maldivian security services held two sets of joint exercises with US troops, demonstrating competence, professionalism, and eagerness to increase interoperability and support for US objectives. Due to Maldives' relative proximity to Diego Garcia, DATT has often called on the Government of the Republic of Maldives for travel clearances for US ships and aircraft in Maldivian space and received positive responses and full cooperation. Despite its small population and limited applicant pool, Maldivians consistently earn places at US military academies and perform well there. In January 2007, Ambassador asked Defense Minister Ismail Shafeeu to consider sending Maldivians on multilateral peace-keeping operations, since there is always demand for peacekeepers from Islamic nations. Shafeeu expressed some reservations, but said he would seriously consider the option because the suggestion came from the US.

¶14. (SBU) The receptiveness of Maldivian defense officials to broader and deeper cooperation with US counterparts is a significant opportunity to enhance relations with a 100 percent Islamic country in a strategic part of the world. Maldives' proximity to the Persian Gulf and its historical and commercial ties to that region further leverage the benefit to be gained by expanding our security relationship. The US should continue to seek increased contact between our

militaries, in particular by trying to arrange more frequent ship visits, training opportunities through IMET and other programs, and joint exercises.

Promoting Commercial Ties

¶15. (SBU) The US Pavilion at the annual Maldives Hotel and Trade Exhibition scheduled for June 2007 will feature 15-20 US exporters or their representatives showing products. In addition, an Embassy-organized US-Maldives Friendship Week will feature booths showcasing the 10.5 million dollars of USG tsunami recovery assistance, the SouthWest Windpower pilot renewable energy project, and activities of the HIV/AIDS Global Fund that earmarked a contribution for Maldives. The Ambassador will address the Maldives Chamber of Commerce at a luncheon. The Embassy Economic Section will arrange and facilitate meetings with GORM officials for the Kathmandu-based Regional Environment Office, Delhi-based Science and Agriculture officers, and the Mumbai-based

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Foreign Commercial Service, thereby initiating regionally-based US actors' enhanced engagement with Maldives. If parent agencies in Washington contribute and follow up on such efforts, small investments can yield large results, both in terms of tangible economic reform and greater goodwill toward the US.

¶16. (SBU) The Embassy will advocate possible Boeing and SouthWest Windpower equipment purchases and explore possible Direct Commercial Sales of military equipment such as small boats. We will also work with the US Trade and Development Agency on possible technical assistance in areas such as renewable energy, "last mile" internet access, and infrastructure development. Moreover, the USG should work with the host government to launch Maldives' participation in the GLOBE scientific education program. The Embassy appreciates the active engagement of USTR Ambassador Hartwick and will work with USTR to ascertain Maldives' level of interest in a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).

Leveraging Public Diplomacy Assets: Education, Role of Women Key

¶17. (SBU) The Maldives is slated to open its first-ever university in 2008. In July 2005, the Embassy PD Section sent a senior Fulbright specialist to Male' to help develop a journalism curriculum. This yielded a GORM commitment to sponsor two students who will obtain journalism master's degrees in the US and return to Male' to teach the new curriculum. PD will also encourage current Fulbright scholars resident in Maldives to offer informal guidance and mentoring to officials planning the new university. Moreover, we recommend the Department support increased English language teaching programs in Maldives through Embassy collaboration with the New Delhi-based Regional English Language Officer. PD and the language officer can work with the Maldivian Ministry of Education to strengthen curriculum development, pedagogy, and teacher training programs, aiming at a mid-term goal of securing an English Language Fellow in Maldives in FY 2008.

¶18. (SBU) In addition, the Embassy is now examining the possibility of having an Education USA-affiliated student advisor resident in Male' to capitalize on Maldivians' growing interest in higher education in America. We will invite US schools and universities to include Maldives in recruitment efforts and promote linkages with American educational institutions and vocational schools. The Embassy will take the first step in this process through a US Education Promotion Fair in Maldives in March, followed by a comprehensive effort during the planned US-Maldives Friendship Week in June. Washington officials can make a

strong impact by attending the event or sending a taped address to be played during a keynote session. Principals might focus on any of a range of issues, including educational opportunities, US business interests, or the transition to multi-party democracy.

¶19. (SBU) Mission also proposes that the Department provide additional I Bureau funding to support increased speaker programming in the Maldives, including on the following themes: Rule of Law; Organization and Role of Political Parties; Role of Women's NGOs; Climate Change; Role of the Media in a Democratic Society; and Narcotics Control. Post will ensure that the five to seven annual International Visitor Fellow Program slots allotted for Maldives cover programs to help in these areas. The Department could greatly enhance these efforts by increasing Sri Lanka's IV

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allocation so that post can offer more places to Maldivian participants. Whenever possible, the Embassy will help coordinate voluntary visitor programs for Maldivians who fund their own travel and expenses. Additionally, civic education continues to remain an urgent need, and the Embassy again asks that the Department support the National Democratic Institute (NDI) December 2005 proposal to increase civic awareness in Maldives (ref F).

¶20. (SBU) There is also a strong need to strengthen the role of women in Maldives. Although a few women are engaged in politics and civil society, pro-government websites regularly vilify and sexually slander female reform activists. A 2005 baseline survey by the Maldives Human Rights Commission indicates that awareness of women's rights is minimal throughout society. The survey yielded widespread complaints of sexual harassment and found that a greater percentage of women than men expressed tolerance for men hitting their wives. Although women have some parity in terms of education and employment opportunities, few women are active in business or politics. The International Republican Institute (IRI) is running a women's NGO empowerment program in Sri Lanka and has expressed willingness to extend training to groups in the Maldives if funding becomes available. Post strongly endorses this proposal and urges DRL and other bureaus to consider Maldives when funding is available for programs to improve the status of women. Such programs would also help Maldives to counter the influence of radical Islamic groups operating within the country.

MOVING FORWARD ON APP

¶21. (SBU) In November 2006, ref D requested Department support for establishing an American Presence Post (APP) in the Maldives. Embassy Colombo currently is forced to cover the Maldives through short visits by several sections and agencies. An APP would provide a platform to coordinate our overall relationship on a consistent basis. Ambassador informally introduced the topic of this APP to President Gayoom when he presented his credentials in October 2006. Gayoom welcomed the idea, asking to be notified of additional details when available. Management will prepare an estimate of the costs to establish this APP and furnish the information to SCA/EX and the Bureau of Resource Management.

BLAKE